

Sleeping with the Enemy

by Bryan Chang, '07

When I fall asleep in public, Alex informs everyone that "Bryan likes to pay money to go to sleep." His words don't stray far from the truth. I am convinced that I am afflicted, cursed, by something. I am haunted by the constant threat of unconsciousness. Glancing behind me, I see nothing, but sense the shadow that lurks. He is never very far, waiting patiently for me to drop my guard. We are very close, my shadow and I, and we know all of each others' tricks. A continuing match of wits takes place every time I step into a living room, a movie theater, a library, an automobile.

The summer after high school, five buddies and I set off in a van to watch baseball games at sixteen different parks across the continent. A dream road trip for six baseball crazed dudes. During one sweltering afternoon in Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium, the game tied in late innings, I passed out completely. As a rule, chests were painted to spell out the home team as we, imposter rabid hometown fans, cheered our lungs dry. Today I was an S. As my comrades leaped to their feet following a big hit, fans in front of us turned and squinted. "Who's Phill?" they asked mockingly. The embarrassed friends just pointed at a seated snoozing S, who would later find the outline of his letter sunburned onto his chest. I snored next to probably a dozen different sets of screaming bleacher fans that summer. "Sleepy McSleeps" and "Permanent S" became my permanent new nicknames.

Yes, I fall asleep a lot. Wherever there is a big test to study for, wherever there is a great movie I must see, wherever there is an important person I should listen to, I am there, ready to enforce my reputation and see/hear/read none of it. It's not that I don't try to maintain long stretches of consciousness, but I fight a losing war.

It's like the cybernetic Borg from Star Trek. "Resistance is futile," they drone, "Classes are irrelevant. Obligations are irrelevant. Friends are irrelevant. Time of day is irrelevant. You will be one with the Borg." A terrified crewman fires phaser blasts at the oncoming machine man, but it has adapted, and continues to mindlessly approach. Suddenly it extends mechanical tentacles into the poor guy's neck, and the crewman's skin goes gray, ceasing to be human and becoming part of their Borg collective. Cut to a close-up of his face. The actor tries to look cold and emotionless, but the hint of a smirk is unmistakable. My God, he likes being a Borg! As I sink into an unauthorized nap, that same Borg smirk invades my soul. Some neglected little voice screams at me. No don't fall asleep you asshole! You're in the middle of something important! Aaaaaaaiiiiiii hate you I hope you die!

But I just smirk.

A metamorphosis. A shift in brain chemistry. A kidnapping. Whatever the cause, someone new and lazy is in my bed, and he's very suave. Industrious and plans ahead guy is nowhere in sight, perhaps taking a nap. New and lazy is the new sheriff in town. New and lazy has his priorities straight. New and lazy has but one desire, and knows just the right things to say to sweet talk my suite mate.

Her: (Cracking door open) Hey Bryan, you said last night to make sure you got up. Don't you have class in 5 minutes?
n.a.l.: (Thinks for a moment, then yawns at her) No... no I don't.

As my face reemerges with pillow, that neglected little voice makes another appearance. I changed my mind. You should go back to sleep. Bed. Warm. Spock. Sleep. Apparently new and lazy has made the little guy an offer he couldn't refuse. It doesn't matter now, because my shadow, new and lazy, the Borg, pick your metaphor, has flexed its muscles and I don't stand a chance. Of course I missed an important class that morning. Of course I scold myself for being so predictable. Next time I warn her: That guy you're going to meet tomorrow morning is in no position to make decisions. Please do not believe him when he tells you that he doesn't have class, or that he's up he's up, or that he's just going to nap a widdle teensy weensy bit more. Please for the love of God, punch him in the mouth. By now, I am used to my disease. If nothing else, it is something I can always depend on. The sun shall rise, the Red Sox shall break my heart, and I shall fall asleep without trying.

Whenever I study at a library, I search for the most unforgiving chair. Splintery wood or cold elementary school plastic is best. The ergonomic Star Trek chairs in the Rock are not even considered. Thus I dutifully trudge to the library, my book bag bloated and disbelieving. You're not going to read all these books you're making me carry. You know that right? It rolls its zipper eyes at me. Shut up book bag. Book bags can't talk. We can in creative writing pieces.

I find a quiet corner where I lay out my stuff across the desk. With all my books open and highlighter in hand, I feel like a real student. But sure enough, within half an hour my eyelids begin to droop and I find myself reading the same sentence over again over again. This highlighting business is tough, I think to myself. I might as well take a nap. Good idea. I sit up in my uncomfortable chair, fold my arms, let my chin drop to my chest, and close my eyes. After a few seconds, I invariably think to myself that this is ridiculous. I won't fall asleep just sitting here like this. I'll sit with my eyes closed for another minute, realize that sleep does not actually approach, then get back to work.

These thoughts are usually my last before I drift off. My head does not bobble. Drooling is at a minimum. I am frozen in place, arms folded in defiance against the enemy I know so well. Hah! My arms shout, we're not going to fall asleep! But when they look up and see my sleeping face, they are embarrassed for their master.

Regardless of whether it is during a mid-study pass out session, or a warm afternoon couch nap, or the death slumber of a Friday night, sleep is ultimately a glowing blanket that I cannot but embrace. Inconveniences aside, when nothing else is right with the world, sleep will always be there, ready to comfort, to heal. It is a dependable friend, who always means well but sometimes just shows up even when it's clear I really need some time alone. I think of that commercial, where

some guys open a bag of chips and the fat friend appears out of nowhere. "You guys hangin' out? I'll hang out." Sleep is like a fat guy.

My roommate Alan has the opposite of the fat guy approach. He has a skinny running guy that disappears just when you need him: insomnia. We make a funny pair. He: shuffling around the apartment late at night, unable to find peace in bed. Me: asleep on a keyboard at the CIT. We often chat as we lie in our beds, the others' form just barely visible from across the room in the darkness. The site of our sleeping disorders. "I feel like I'm going to puke," I say to him after a particularly ill advised Saturday evening, "I think I'll just stay up until I feel better." Alan agrees to this plan, then asks me if I might turn down my computer's music. No response. Bryan? Light snoring. He sighs, climbs out of bed, walks over to my computer and shuts it off.

Upon waking up from an unplanned trip to dreamland, I'm like Captain Picard after he is rehumanized, thinking of all the deaths he has caused as a henchman for the Borg. My God, what have I done? The library alarm is sounding, and I have successfully written the name and date at the top of my paper after three hours of concentrated work. I have missed the winning run cross the plate. I have a page of non-decipherable hieroglyphics for lecture notes. I have no recollection of the commencement speech. The party is over; people are going home. Credits roll and I watch as those around me talk excitedly about the movie that slid by during a prolonged blink. I am sitting in a dentist chair with a variety of sharp objects filling my propped open mouth, suddenly aware that I had been snoring. The masked faces above snicker. They jokingly ask me if I'm comfortable. I tell them yes, very comfortable, and yes I know I just fell asleep during oral surgery and yes I heard myself snoring thanks for laughing at me. This comes out all vowels, but they get the idea. Who has two thumbs and falls asleep during a root canal? This guy. Maybe Alex deserves credit for his insight. These naps are getting expensive.

You always hear things like "by the time you're 60 you will have been asleep for 20 years of your life." This is supposed to be shocking, horrifying. 20 years of missed experience. 20 years of settling into bed only to hit the snooze button after what seems like seconds. 20 years of personal stagnation as the world sped by. Of course I am upset when I doze through an important lecture. I am disappointed that I have seen the first 45 minutes of "Fantasia" nine times but never the ending. It is annoying to have to nibble down my books in four-page spurts. Sometimes I'll even get to bed early, in the hopes that new and lazy will take a break, and industrious and plans ahead might be the one that wakes up in the morning. Sometimes this even works.

But for all the "life" that we miss, we live during that time in a magical place--a place that is at once deceptive, alluring, addictive, necessary, wonderful. I'm just a very good member of that sleepy human condition. I embody the propensity within everyone to have a complex relationship with sleep. I am their sleepy hero. They fall victim to/in love with it. They wake up, groan and swear. They wake up and sigh wistfully. They wake up and go back to sleep.