

Stay In the Moment

By Lola Lariscy

Charlotte loves waking up at three or four in the morning. She doesn't get up; she just lies there, relishing the notion that she doesn't have to get up yet: time to think of the day ahead or the day behind; time for time to stop. She hears nothing but the air conditioning; she sees nothing but the faint light from the street lamp outside. No one talking. No one harassing. No one demanding.

Then she goes back to sleep and is thrust into the chaos of six a.m. A day that doesn't relent, doesn't pause and doesn't care.

Night time and here it goes again. She wakes again at three. She doesn't open her eyes. She listens: a faint wail of siren far down the street; a trash compactor near the next building. She briefly wonders who would be throwing out trash in

the middle of the night. She quickly remembers that she doesn't care. She stops thinking anything as she lays her consciousness back to sleep.

The next day the stress comes early. A client wants a contract redone from the ground up; another client decides they needed a personal visit—three hours away. Never mind the traffic, never mind the rain. They want it done their way immediately. She curses the whole way there. She curtsies on her way out—her way of being cheeky. They don't notice. If they did notice they'd probably think she was being deferential.

That night she goes to bed early. She's exhausted. Her only mantra as she drifts off to sleep is "Stop moving. Stop time. Stay still and let the world move on ahead."

She wakes as she usually does around three. She'd fallen asleep with her watch on. She sneaks a quick peek at the glowing face. Nope—not time to get up yet. She smiles as she closes her eyes, trying not to drift back off too quickly. She makes a list of what she has to do in just a few hours: go to the bank, mail a package, and call her telephone company. She shudders at the mundaneness of it all. She thinks about the trouble she'd had at the grocery store the day before. Had she overreacted? The salad mix had clearly been marked \$2. Did they need to make her wait 20 minutes to talk to a manager, and then stand in a whole

separate line to pay for it? Had it been worth the 50 cent savings for her to wait? Should she just have walked off?

She finds herself getting more and more stressed. This is not supposed to be a time for stress. This is supposed to be a time for peaceful contemplation. She grimaces. She doesn't ever want to go back to that grocery store.

She overwrites the obsessive worrying with peaceful thoughts. She imagines waves lapping on a beach. She sees white sand and palm trees; a small, isolated island. No one else is there. She listens to gulls in the distance and...

Her eyes bolt open. She hears the trash compactor again. It's uncommon enough this time of morning. What she doesn't understand is why it's right outside the window. Had someone moved it? Why?

She sits up and looks around. She's on a floor. Not her floor: a floor, in a living room. It's the same layout as hers, but it's not hers. How the hell did she end up there? Had she sleepwalked? That would be a new one for her. Had she been kidnapped?

She is terrified to the point of paralysis. She's locked in that position—sitting up on a stranger's floor, hands palms down

behind her, supporting her; the only thing supporting her. Her arms are jelly.

She wants to scream, but can't. When the fright becomes unbearable for her mind, she hears a snapping sound. She's barely aware of the thought that it could be her brain. If her brain is snapping, how is she thinking?

The darkness changes in front of her, disintegrates into copper particles and reforms. She feels her bed beneath her. She falls back and, exhausted, drifts back to sleep.

"You have some major bags under your eyes. Are you still not sleeping?"

She makes a face that looks like death vomiting. Not glamorous, seductive death; ugly, haggard death. She's not well. She should go home, but she has too much to do.

"Yep. Still not sleeping. I don't know what's wrong with me. When I am asleep, I'm torturing myself with panic dreams about work and responsibilities. My only oasis is when I wake up during the night. I look out through the slits of the blinds and, I don't know...everything's so peaceful. The world is quiet." She shrugs. "Except last night it was weird."

Her co-worker Delonda was originally just being polite, but now she's kind of interested. "What was weird about last night?"

"I dunno. I was probably still asleep. I could have sworn, though, that I woke up in someone else's apartment."

Delonda goes from interested to alarmed. "Are you sleepwalking? How could you end up in someone else's apartment? Do you have a key to your neighbor's apartment?"

"No! Of course not! But I swear I was in an apartment closer to the trash compactor."

Her friend is now just worried. She reaches into her pocket. "I didn't want to give this to you unless I really thought you needed it. I'm giving it to you now."

She looks puzzled, but takes the card she's handing her. It's a therapist's business card. She rolls her eyes and throws it on the table. "I don't need therapy. I need to sleep."

The co-worker is dejected. "Therapy will help you sleep. You need something, Charlotte."

That night she fulfills her nightly ritual: scrubs the face, moisturizes, brushes her teeth and falls asleep to the soft violin strings wafting through her speakers. She has her radio set to shut off NPR after half-an-hour. That night she is out well before the radio.

Time for time to stop. Time to forget. Time to wake up rested. The sound of gently lapping waves rouses her from the ratcheting terror of her panic dreams and softly deposits her into her early morning meditation. She smiles. The waves sound particularly immediate this morning. She feels a cool breeze on shoulders. She really needed to remember to shut off the ceiling fan if she's going to wear a light night gown.

Her night gown...it's wet. Not in an 8 year-old way, but in a really wet kind of way—like she's soaking wet, in a bath tub or a swimming pool.

She opens her eyes. She sees darkness all around. She hears lapping waves; feels cold, cold water.

She looks up. Stars.

Her eyes widen. *STARS? WTF?*

She had been unconsciously treading water. At that moment, though, she begins to sink. She starts screaming. In the midst of her piercing shrieks, she hears the same *SNAP* she heard the night before.

She's in her bed. She's soaking wet. She feels something like seaweed on her arm.

She rushes out of her bed and flicks on the light. She looks back to her bed. A tiny, tiny fish stares at her. It flails as it loses its breath. She stares helplessly at it. She doesn't have any salt water. What can she do? She grabs a pot from the kitchen, fills it with filtered water and bats the fish in as it hits a flailing high. She hopes its okay for a few minutes.

She runs out to the man-made lake behind her apartment complex. Is that where she'd been? She's determined to figure out what happened, so she brings herself and the fish back there.

She hardly goes back there; the entrance to her apartment building is way before this lake. She's so far back into the complex that you can barely see the buildings any more. This is strictly for pedestrians and bicyclists. She's neither, so she'd never had the need to explore.

She lays the pot into the water and the fish swims back in.

She looks up. Yep, those are the stars she'd just seen. She starts crying and sits on a bench near the water. What the heck just happened?

She thinks about her mantra: time to leave the day behind; time for time to stop. She looks back at the building behind

her. She is in the direct line of site to the apartment nearest the compactor. She stands up and walks toward that apartment. It's a straight shot. She walks to her apartment; another straight shot.

She doesn't have a compass, but she's pretty sure she has made a straight line from west to east. She starts thinking about what happens when the sun goes down. In college, she'd fallen asleep in astronomy class every day. The only thing that would wake her up was the guy in the back who always made popping sounds with his cheek. He's a published astrophysicist now. So, she doesn't know much about the earth's physics, but she knows that the earth is turning, which gives the appearance of the sun setting in the west. Is it possible that she willed herself to stay still while the earth moved? Does her little mantra stop her own time, but not all of Earth's?

She shakes her head. That's some weird, crazy stuff. She doesn't go back to sleep. She doesn't go to work. The receptionist at Happy Family counseling services finds her sitting on the doorstep at 9 a.m.

"Do you have an appointment ma'am?"

"I need to relax! But not so relaxed that I get left back in time, you know what I mean. I need to sleep through the night!"

The receptionist lets her in. Charlotte babbles for a few minutes more. The receptionist becomes more and more alarmed, bordering on scared. They'd had tweakers before, but nothing like this.

"Um...I'll tell you what. You come in and sit down. I'll let one of the counselors know this is an emergency situation and I'll ask her to clear her schedule." She looks fretfully around and down at the schedule. Luckily there are only a few names. "I might ask more than one to clear their schedule. This might be a tag team effort."



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