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In the Realm of Jet Lag

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In my regular life -- the one I call "real" -- I go to sleep every night at 8:30. My body gets me up early in the morning, and by the time darkness falls I'm starting to lose consciousness, fast. All the corners of the night, therefore, everything associated with the sleeping world, is as foreign to me as Antarctica. In my regular life I know the time so well that I can usually tell the hour to the minute without looking at my watch.

Under jet lag, however, all that is thrown into convulsions. Not just the steady routine, the sense of clear divisions, the ability to get on with the world, be in sync with it. No, something deeper is dissolved. I get off a plane, 17 hours out of joint, and tell naked secrets to a person I know I don't trust. A friend starts talking about her days -- her plans, her friends, the things she wants to do -- and tears start welling in my eyes, in a restaurant. I can't sleep at night (because I've been sleeping in the day), and so I try to go through my routine, as I might in the normal world. But I write the wrong name on the uncharacteristically emotional letter. I shower the stranger with endearments. When the lady at the bank offers to credit my account with $3,000 in exchange for the $30,000 check I have given her (a large part of my yearly income), I smile and say, "Have a nice day."

I often think that I have traveled into a deeply foreign country under jet lag, somewhere more mysterious in its way than India or Morocco. A place that no human had ever been until 40 or so years ago and yet, now, a place where more and more of us spend more and more of our lives. It's not quite a dream state, but it's certainly not wakefulness, and though it seems as if we're visiting another continent, there are no maps or guidebooks to this other world. There are not even any clocks.

I live these days in Japan, and my mother, who is in her 70's and lives alone, is in California. Every time I want to look in on her, therefore, I get on a plane and take the 10-hour flight across the Pacific. But for a week -- at least -- after I arrive, I'm not myself. I look like myself, perhaps, I may sound something like myself, but I'm wearing my sweater inside out and leaving the unremarkable movie "Bounce" embarrassingly moved. I'm not the person I might be when I'm antic or giddy or have been up too late; I'm a kind of spectral being floating above myself.

Every time I fly back to Japan, I become the meridian opposite of that impostor, a Sebaldian night wanderer who cannot be trusted to read or write anything for at least another week. If I visit my mother four times a year, therefore -- a reasonable thing to do in the ordinary human scheme of things -- I spend eight weeks a year, or almost a sixth of my life, in this nowhere state. Not quite on the ground, yet not entirely off it.

A day, a human day, has a certain shape and structure to it; a day, in most respects, resembles a room in which our things are ordered according to our preference. It may be empty or it may be full, but in either case it is familiar. Over here is the place where you rest (10 p.m. to 6 a.m., perhaps), over there is the place where you eat or work or feel most alive. You know your way around the place so well, you can find the bathroom in the dark. But under jet lag, of course, you lose all sense of where or who you are. You get up and walk toward the bathroom and bang into a chair. You reach toward the figure next to you and then remember that she's 7,000 miles away, at work. You get up for lunch, and then remember that you have eaten lunch six times already. You feel almost like an exile, a fugitive of sorts, as you walk along the hotel corridor at 4 a.m., while all good souls are in their beds, and then begin to yawn as everyone around you goes to work. The day is stretched and stretched, in this foreign world of displacement, till it snaps.

I sleep, and sleep again, and the dreams that come to me, suddenly and violently, seem to belong to someone else: a Buddhist scholar (whom I have never met in life) is speaking to me about transience; I'm talking of a house burning down; I'm slipping into a back room at a wedding with a long-ago girlfriend. Every one of the dreams, I realize when I wake, is about the dissolution of self.

Of course it is, my more settled, more sensible self will say; your sleep itself is jangled. You've been hurried into the next room of consciousness before you have had a chance to pack. You're falling into unconsciousness in the middle of a sentence, with the TV on and all the parts of you undigested. And yet, of course -- such is the state of the spell -- I can't hear this sensible voice in the place I now find myself. My stuff has been stolen -- and stolen again -- and I am suddenly bereft. A woman is speaking perfect English to me (though we are on the streets of China), and I know, somehow, that she speaks like this because she grew up in Fiji. A parade of ladies of the night walks past, and the woman asks me what I should do about my stolen things.

When he was a boy, I recall, Rudyard Kipling woke one night with a start and realized that he had been walking in his sleep. All the way through the dreaming house and out into the garden, as the light came up. "The night got into my head," he later wrote, and thus became the laureate of Empire's troubled subconscious, of all that happened on the dark side of the camp. I go out again, as obscurely proud as a child who has climbed Everest before breakfast, and greet the figures streaming off the boat -- it is Bangkok now, 6 a.m. -- as they go to work. Vendors selling chili with meat or mint leaves and, on the far side of the river, monks paddling from one home to the next in the early light. At each house built above the water, a woman bends down to give the monks an offering of vegetables and rice.

The last taxis slipping back toward the suburbs. The girls finally leaving the discos and clubs and heading back to the shacks where they sleep across the river. The city caught by surprise, going about its private rites while the bulldozers, churning, in the little lanes, all the neon now turned off, grind back and forth, back and forth, removing the evidence of night.

Because jet lag is so much a part of my life now, I tell myself I will make the most of it; attend to it, enjoy its disruptions, as I would those of a geographically foreign place. When I arrive at my mother's home, therefore, I go out at first light for lunch and enjoy my hometown as I have never done before: the smell of kelp around the fast-food stand, the pungent tang of the sea that will disappear once the day is under way. People returning from parties, or the graveyard shift, others going out into the day while it is still virgin: all the people I never see in my ordinary life.

And when I return from California to Japan, I return by way of some strange Asian city -- Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, Hanoi -- and for my first few nights of discombobulation prowl the dark. Were I to go anywhere that resembled home, I would be keeping people up by going out for lunch at 3 a.m. -- and would, in turn, be thrown out by them as I turned in for a good night's sleep at 11 in the morning. So, embracing the traveler's first rule -- everything is interesting if you look at it with the right eyes -- I use the sleeplessness to try to see a world, a self, I would never see otherwise.

I step out of the airport in Singapore, though in Singapore it is easy to feel as if you have never stepped out of the airport: everything is so spotless, so streamlined, that the entire city feels as if it were a line of duty-free stores and manmade rain forests set along landscaped streets. I pick up a book by William Gibson (its theme is jet lag) and find that it is set in the same Park Hyatt hotel in Tokyo last visited in Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation." I see a gorgeous woman in a backless dress and then, coming round to the front of the store, realize that it's just a mannequin.

The lure of modern travel, for many of us, is that we don't go from A to B so much as from A to Z, or from A to alpha; most often, we end up somewhere between the two, not quite one, and not quite the other -- in an airport, perhaps, that is and isn't the place we left and the place we think we're going to. Jet lag, in some ways, is the perfect metaphor for this, the neurological equivalent, I often feel, of some long, gray airport passageway that leads from one nowhere space to another. It speaks, you could say, for much in the accelerated world where we speed between continents and think we have conquered both space and time.

And, yet, of course -- this is its power -- it isn't just a metaphor. It is painfully real, as real as the words that are coming out slurred or as that piece of paper on which we have methodically added two plus two and come up with three. We have been placed at a tilt, and the person who emerges from us is someone suffering from something much deeper than the high-frequency hearing loss or the superdry sinuses that come from flying 500 miles an hour above the weather in a pressurized cabin.

Being human, we try to counteract the spell in the usual human ways, by telling stories and exchanging cures: take Dramamine or melatonin; walk barefoot across fresh grass for 10 minutes after you arrive. Carry a high-intensity lamp with you to reproduce the light patterns of the place you left, turn your watch forward as soon as you board, to the time of the place you are going to.

But none of it, I think, really speaks to the person we're becoming. I feel, when lagged, as if I'm seeing the whole world through tears, or squinting; everything gets through to me, but with the wrong weight or meaning. I can't see the signs, only their reflections in the puddles. I can't follow directions, only savor the fact of being lost. It's like watching a foreign movie without subtitles, perhaps: I can't follow the story, the arc of character, but something else -- that inflection of a hand, this unregarded silence -- comes through to me intensely.

Things carry a different value, a different heft, when you're jet-lagged, but there's no counter on which the exchange rates are posted. People will tell you it's like being under a foreign influence, but it's not. For one thing, unlike in the case of drink or drugs, its effects don't diminish with the years but grow and grow. You can make rules for yourself for what you should do in this parallel world, but they are rules, by definition, that you can't remember when you need them. (The imagination is a drunk who has lost his watch, as the critic Guy Davenport says, who has to get drunk again to find it.) Once, under jet lag, I threw away all the notes I had taken on a magical, and unrepeatable, foreign trip. Another time, I decided to do my taxes as soon as I got off the plane and, happily ignoring a $40,000 payment I had received, faced month after month of I.R.S. letters and threats.

I try to make the most of it, as ever, and say that jet lag can release me from the illusion of the self. Getting off the plane in California, I go through three months' worth of correspondence and hardly notice that this letter is praising me to the skies while that one is condemning me to perdition. They each belong to someone else, I tell myself, and I'm very happy not to be a part of his drama.

The next day, trying to pick up the pieces of my life, I go to the post office, the bank, and all I can see is a desperate loneliness in the faces in the California street; they seem plaintive, unclaimed somehow, as if they were issuing a cry for help. For someone who has just stepped off the plane from Japan, where people wear masks of cheerfulness as they go from one place to the next, it looks abject.

The next day, though, I have begun to settle into the world around me; I hardly notice the lonely faces. Four, five days later, if you were to remind me of what I'd said before, I'd say: "What are you talking about? Everything's normal. These people are just the way they're supposed to be."

One day in 1971, a woman called Sarah Krasnoff made off with her 14-year-old grandson, who was caught up in an unseemly custody dispute, and took him into the sky. In a plane, she knew, they were subject to no laws, and if they never stopped moving, the law could never catch up with them. They flew from New York to Amsterdam. When they arrived, they turned around and flew from Amsterdam to New York. Then they flew from New York to Amsterdam again, and from Amsterdam to New York, again and again and again, month after month.

They took about 160 flights in all, one after the other, according to the stage piece "Jet Lag." They saw 22 movies an average of seven times each. They ate lunch again and again and turned their watches six hours forward, then six hours back. The whole fugitive enterprise ended when Krasnoff, 74, finally collapsed and died, the victim, doctors could only suppose, of terminal jet lag.

I wake up one day in my mother's house, on one of my periodic trips "home," and we have breakfast together. She walks more slowly than she

used to, and has lost, she tells me, two inches in height; now, as I prepare to fly back across the Pacific, she shows me the articles and clippings she saved for me. A cartoon from The New Yorker, an article about the virtue of drinking water eight times a day.

She drives me to the airport, bravely, hardly letting on that she might be sad that her only living relative is flying to the far side of the world, only putting out a protective hand as I disappear through the security machine. I get on a small propeller plane for Los Angeles and see her standing at the gate, waving. At 70, there are certain things you must let go of.

I watch her standing there, waving and waving as the plane starts up, begins to taxi, then takes off into the heavens, and I know that this is an image I must keep close to me. A person for whom I am responsible in some respects, too kind to burden me with her own concerns.

Fourteen hours later, I'm on a different continent and hardly able to imagine the life, the home, I left this morning. It's as if I have switched into another language -- a parallel plane -- and none of the feelings that were so real to me this morning can carry through to it. It's not that I don't want to hear them; it's that they seem to belong now to a person I no longer am.

Was it always like this, I wonder, when people were just boarding carriages for London -- or, even today, when a nephew of a friend of mine makes the two-week-long walk to school across the fields in Kenya? Isn't infidelity part of the sales tax, part of the lure, of travel? It is, of course, and it's nothing but the shadow side of the dissolution of self, the release from normal boundaries that flight induces. Indeed, it's part of what moves us to take flights in the first place: to walk through that archway of lights and become a different person. A girl in a long dress is serving up an elixir of forgetfulness. The music numbs us into a kind of trance state. Lethe and the Sirens are available on every corner in the global order.

And yet the man who disappears into the dark arcade knows on some level what he's doing and chooses the amnesia that's waiting for him. He drinks to forget; he goes home with a stranger explicitly because he longs to escape the life that doesn't satisfy. In the realm of jet lag, though, the double life feels accidental: you're watching TV and someone comes and changes the channel on you, and you can't summon the energy to get up and change it back. I don't want to betray the life I left behind six hours ago, but I have changed my money on arrival, changed the voltage on my shaver, and I'm working in a different currency now. I could take a drug of sorts to reverse the effects of the drug of displacement, but I'm not sure if it could return me to the person I was when I got on the plane. All it could do, perhaps, is induce me to forget that he is someone different.

"You'll call me when you get there?" a sweetheart asks.

"Of course I will," I say, and do. But whoever is calling isn't the person who made the promise, and the sentences, the sentiments, so achingly alive last night, now sound as if they're coming from someone very different.

Not long ago, in Damascus, I lived for a few days on muezzin time: long, silent mornings in the Old City before dawn, walking through labyrinths of dead-end alleyways, in and out around the great mosque, and then long, hot days in my room, sleeping as if I were in my bed in California. Then up again in the dark, the only decoration in my room a little red arrow on the wall to show which direction Mecca was.

I went on like this for a while -- watching the light come up in the mosque, seeing the city resolve itself into its shapes in the first hours of morning and then disappearing myself, down into a well -- and then, after a few days, something snapped: at night, by day, I could not sleep. I stayed up all the way through a night and the next day couldn't sleep. I drew the curtains, got into pajamas, buried myself inside the sheets. But my mind was alive now, or at least moving as with a phantom limb. Soon it was dark again, my time to wake up, and at last, at 2 a.m. or so, reconciled to my sleeplessness, I picked up an old copy of "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" and began to read.

From outside, in the fourth-floor corridor, the sound of a door being opened, then closing. Furtive rustles, a circle of whispers. The thump of a party, forbidden booze, female laughter. The ping of the elevator as it came and opened its doors; the sound of the doors closing again, the machine going up again and down. Sometimes I went to the window and, drawing the curtains, saw minarets bathed in green light, the only tall monuments visible across the sleeping city. Once, putting away the story of Dr. Thompson and his Samoan, I opened the door to check the corridor, but there was no one there. No footsteps, no figures, no anything.

Hours later, I was in an Internet cafe in Covent Garden in London, not sure who or where I was, having not slept for what seemed like weeks. And hours after that, I was in Manhattan, where I had lived in a former life. My bags had not arrived, and so I was wearing clothes not my own, bought with an airline voucher. Outside, a drill screamed in the harsh summer light -- "reconstruction," the front desk said -- and I tried to push myself down into sleep, somewhere else. A little after midnight -- I was just coming to life and light now -- I went out and walked to Times Square, where there was still excitement. A man was cradling his girl's head in his arm and kissing her, kissing her softly. She stooped down to get into a cab, and he leaned in after her, kissing her again, as if to pull her back.

The cabdriver, with a conspicuous slam, put on his meter, and the car pulled away. A woman nearby was shaking her breasts at a male companion, who looked as if he belonged to another world from hers. He watched her in delight, the screens and lights all around exploding.

The man who had been kissing, kissing his girl, eyes closed, straightened himself up as the cab disappeared around a corner, looked around -- taxis, crowds, from every direction -- and then walked across to a telephone as if to start the night anew. Crowds streamed out of movie theaters, so you could imagine for a moment that this was New Year's Eve, the center of the world. The hushed, deserted mosque of the Old City of Damascus -- I'd been there yesterday morning -- was a universe away.

Pico Iyer is the author, most recently, of "Sun After Dark: Flights Into the Foreign," from which this article is adapted. The book will be published next month by Knopf.