

Sleep Stories: Encroach by Andrew McMillan,

Introduced by Dr Jason Ellis

TRANSCRIPT

Introduction: [music swells] [whispered] Sleep Stories.

Andrew McMillan and Jason Ellis in a Sonderbug Production in association with Durham Book Festival and New Writing North, and with music by Jayne Dent. This is Sleep Stories.

Dr Jason Ellis: I am Professor Jason Ellis, Professor of Sleep Science at Northumbria University, in Newcastle. Under that framework, I'm also the director of the Northumbria Centre for Sleep Research, and I do clinical work, as well as a lot of research. And my research focus, really, is looking at preventative sleep medicine. So, how do we stop people from developing sleep disorders such as insomnia.

The story that we're looking at today is by Andrew McMillan, and it's called 'Encroach', and it really does focus in on the experience of insomnia. It has such a richness, which I normally would actually observe more in clinic than in research. Andrew talks about not sleeping, and how much that scares him. And that's beautiful, because what we see from a clinical perspective is that people with insomnia, they develop something called a sleep anxiety. And this can become, throughout the daytime, preoccupation with sleep - almost craving sleep during the daytime. And then at night-time, it becomes quite aversive, quite a combative area. As soon as they make their way up to bed, it's almost sort of like all the lights have come on. They start to become more anxious, more frustrated, physically more tense, and

mentally much more alert. And I think that's one of the things that really does come through from Andrew's descriptions.

Sleep is a very interesting topic. For many, many years, it's just been seen as something we do; a very passive activity. And yet, from the 1950s, we started to understand that actually we use up as much energy at night when we're asleep as we do during the daytime. We just divert the energy. So we're diverting it inwards. So instead of walking and talking and thinking, what we're doing is, we're trying to get our body back to a state of what we call homeostasis.

So what do we mean by that? In essence, we're trying to get our body and our mind into a state where it's at its most optimal. So we fight infections when we're asleep. We clear out toxins from the brain when we sleep. We fix all of those systems which relate to heart, liver, lungs, kidney, pancreas. We also regulate our emotions during the night, which is quite an interesting thing. And it really fits into the whole idea of dreams because we do it during rapid eye movement sleep, or REM sleep, which we always associate with dreaming. And, of course, this whole dreaming issue, what we're doing is we're allowing ourselves to emotionally regulate. So if you've had a bad day, it's during this period at night that you're going to resolve those issues, either through problem solving, or indeed through just working through the trauma or the stress or the anxieties of the day.

Insomnia is a very interesting concept. So if we look at the diagnosis of insomnia, we generally classify as a reported difficulty in either getting off to sleep, staying asleep, or waking up too early in the morning. And this should occur despite having adequate opportunity for sleep. If you don't give yourself enough time to sleep, that's a sleep problem, but it's not insomnia.

The problem should exist for at least three nights a week. And the reason we talk about three nights a week is because even normal sleepers will have one or two poor nights compared to the lovely sylvan sleep that they normally get. For it to be diagnosed as a chronic disorder, it should exist for at least three months. Now that's where I personally disagree with diagnostics. I think for the first two weeks of insomnia, it's an adaptive response, something has kicked it off; it's a stress response. But after two weeks, I think then it becomes quite an abnormal experience. The other part of the diagnosis is that it should relate to daytime dysfunction. So the individual should report challenges with memory, concentration, work, or school. In essence, people with insomnia have to work twice as hard, put in twice as much effort, in order to achieve the same performance results as somebody who's sleeping normally.

We talk about the epidemiology of insomnia, how many people have insomnia, and in terms of the diagnostic that we talked about, we're estimating somewhere between 10 and 15% of the population will have insomnia at any given time. Now, if you took out some of those differences in terms of the diagnostics, and asked people 'Do you have problems getting off to sleep, staying asleep or waking up too early in the morning?', we actually see that rise to somewhere between 30 to 40% of the population. So we're talking about a huge public health issue.

Andrew McMillan: 'Encroach', written and read by Andrew McMillan.

Not sleeping scared him, that was the truth of it. Always had.

When he was a child, staying at his grandma's caravan in Cleethorpes, she told him that the campsite warden would come over if they weren't asleep by eight. They'd see any light. Hear any noise. There'd be trouble.

When he was out at a bar and it got past ten or started getting dark outside, he got anxious and either left quickly or drank so much he'd forget the time.

Tonight he lay awake, falling through ten, eleven, twelve, unable to drift off, feeling the hours drop slowly away. He got up, threw on the trainers sluiced green from the wet garden, zipped up a coat, and went for a walk.

His house was on the edge of the city: 'quiet enough but close enough' as he always described it when people asked why he'd moved to this area. They used words like undeveloped, run-down.

Some even said rough. What he liked to think they meant was intact, untouched.

He climbed the street and looked over his shoulder, saw the shadow theatre of the city centre. He'd never seen it quite like that before, the skyscrapers like a row of uneven teeth, more visible, somehow, now the rows of houses around him had been lost to the night. There was nobody about. An occasional taxi, sometimes an airport train, pulled onwards to the central station.

What scared him really was that once it started it wouldn't stop, this not sleeping. When he was a boy there was one night when he hadn't been able to sleep. He couldn't think why now, and it didn't really matter, but he remembered it had led to months of no sleep, of waking every time his exhausted mum or dad tried to sneak out, having sat with him for hours.

There'd been odd hallucinations: people chasing him, people running down the landing towards his box room. One time they'd followed him to Cleethorpes and his grandma had sat all night with a wet flannel against his brow.

His mum said it was just because his brain was sleeping but his body wasn't.

The next night there was the same state of unsleep. He felt it first as worry, then as frustration, then finally as anger; his whole body charged with it. He tried just laying there, closing his eyes. His mum had often told him that even if he couldn't sleep, he could always just rest his eyes: it would have the same effect. It never did.

He felt itchy, but underneath the surface of the skin somehow. He decided on another walk; it might help. The fresh air, maybe, the quietness of the night. The city skyline still perched on the shoulder of the horizon. He thought it must be because his eyes were adjusting to the gloom of the hour, but he felt he could make out new details: a pride flag in one of the windows, backlit by the white glare of someone's TV; the flat shadows of houseplants drooping on a balcony, like algae in some huge expanse of an aquarium.

He looked around as he continued to walk. Here people closed their blinds, or drew their curtains; some even still had that white lace netting up for privacy. Over there, in the centre, it was just glass, everything always permanently on display. Eyes that couldn't close.

A couple of days without sleep is just about manageable. You become slower and heavier, almost as though you're ageing faster. But after that, things tilt sideways.

He was stuck in a loop, he knew that, like a learner driver trapped on a roundabout. The fear of not sleeping, then not sleeping, then the frustration, the anger, the exhaustion.

The moon was brighter than usual that night, leaking in through the blinds, and so when he stepped out to try and walk away his body's resistance to turning off, the security light didn't even come on, probably convinced that it was daytime. The glint of the moon made the street into a river. He almost couldn't look directly at it.

He walked to the top of the street and instead of turning left, which would have taken him by the scrubland and the warehouses and the dump, he turned right towards the centre of the city. He walked a few steps and stopped. His eye was pulled in the direction of the estate over the road. It must have been the way the silver light from the cloudless sky was hitting the windows of the two-storey houses, or the way it bounced from the cat's eyes that ran down the dual carriageway. As he looked, he saw, maybe two, three streets over, glass windows that seemed as high as a streetlamp, steel beams running across the top of them like a curtain rod, holding them in place. He walked over, crossing the empty road and onto the grass verge that framed the bus stop. He found himself stepping around fence posts, noticing jigsaw pieces of plant pots on the pavement, until there, in front of him, surrounded by sleeping houses that seemed completely oblivious, dropped like a silver javelin from the heavens, was a skyscraper. Forty floors of it. Like a searchlight reaching into the clouds, or like a great ship, bow facing down into the depths, just before it sinks. He couldn't say why, but it felt like a warning.

After that, at least he had a reason not to sleep. The next night was muggy, that closeness that makes the air feel like a damp shoe that you've stood in for too long.

If the previous night had been hardly one at all, the moon keeping a light on for the dawn on its return, then this night seemed the opposite. Pitch black. It was odd, he thought, as he lay in bed; especially at this time of year, it never felt fully dark, but now he could have opened the blinds and still slept in. He looked out of the window. Everything seemed as though it was in shadow. He looked up. No stars. Definitely no moon. No illuminated trails of aeroplanes. He walked downstairs, not turning on the light, as though the calm pitch of nothingness outside could be scared away by the flickering of a bulb. His hand rested for a moment on the doorhandle; he didn't know why. He slowly pulled the heavy door of the house: new, PVC, wedged into the old frame of the 1890's terrace. He looked outside. Nothing. No lights in any of the bungalows over the road, or in the houses either side of him. Nothing in the sky, but as he looked up, he had the urge to crouch, or hide his face, as though someone was peering down at him. He didn't have anything on his feet and was still in the day's underwear that he'd decided to go to bed in, but he stepped out onto the grey chippings that covered the driveway. When he got to the gate he opened it and looked up. It couldn't be. There, just over the road, looming so high it blocked out the sky and cast a dark net over everything around him, another skyscraper. This one in new brick, scrubbed a certain way to make it look old. After six or seven storeys, the brick gave way to silver corrugated metal and windows. It must have been 200 storeys high. Standing, staring up at it, alone on the street, he felt like one of those

diagrams of a human sketched next to a great whale, to show the difference in dimensions. To prove the insignificance of man.

It was nothing. He'd spent the day trying to get people to notice the new high-rise, but nobody seemed bothered. Work men set up cones at the other end of the street to dig for the water pipes, and never once glanced over. Children raced their tired parents to school past it, and never looked up. He asked his neighbour if he'd noticed anything odd and they said they thought there was a peculiar smell coming from the dump that morning. They'd have to write another letter. It was nothing, then, just him. Just his brain asleep before his body. All this glass. More had started to appear now. Glinting eyes all around him, stretching over him like a translucent wave. He felt like a fish in a too-small bowl, looking out helplessly at the steel footprints pressed into the foundations of the houses all around him, houses that looked smaller, older than he'd remembered.

He just needed to rest his eyes. Just to close them for a moment. Let his body catch up with his brain. He tried to imagine sleep like a tide coming in, an imperceptible but definite creep, inch by inch, over his feet, his legs, his torso, his chest, until he was the water. And then the water was beyond him.

[close music]

[white noise]