

:: LETTERS FROM PRISON :: TED WHITE ::  
Letter No. 9

How do you put yourself to sleep at night?

I don't know about you, but for as long as I can remember I've told myself stories. Perhaps I should make that "stories" because these are not stories in the conventional sense: they are not complete (with beginning, middle, and end), they rarely have coherent plots, and sometimes they might be more accurately described as "plans" or diagrams. Sometimes they involve dialogue and social interaction, sometimes adventure, and often fantasy. But as often they are static--imagined situations, imagined *things*.

I started doing this as a very small child. I can remember lying in my bed on a hot summer evening, perhaps four or five years old, thinking about a model airplane one of my uncles had made while he was hospitalized, late in World War 2. He had given it to me, and I was thrilled with it. It was made of a balsa wood skeleton, covered with white tissue paper that formed its skin and was never painted. All the control surfaces--rudder, stabilizers, ailerons--worked, controlled by a joy-stick and "pedals" in the cockpit. It was marvelous. I thought about it had been constructed, and thought about how I might make one like it--maybe big enough to sit in, or even to fly. In the years that followed I "planned" many objects like that model plane: cars, airplanes, rockets, weapons, dwelling places (secret caves, tree houses, etc.), whatever caught my fancy at the time. These might be called "daydreams," but they always segued into actual dreams.

The common feature in all the "stories" I told myself each night and every night was that they were serials: each ended for the night in my transition into sleep, and if each remained unfinished it would be continued the following night. (If I "finished" one, I'd start another immediately. A "finished" story would not put me to sleep.)

As common as the static "plans" (which put me to sleep through the contemplation of minute details) were the adventures. These, my mother was convinced, kept me awake. She knew about them because they were, in my childhood, quite noisy.

I grew up in the radio era--before television. I was ten when commercial TV made its debut in my area--but my father, a lover of 19th Century classical music broadcast on the radio (and an early enthusiast of FM radio for this reason), found one excuse after another to put off buying a TV set. At first he was "waiting for color TV." When this came about, he was "waiting for them to perfect color." Later, he was "waiting for the price to come down." He finally bought a Sony TV in the mid-Seventies, only a year before his first stroke diminished his ability to enjoy it or the radio and his music. So I grew up without TV, and was very aware of the death of all forms of radio programming, except music, in the mid-Fifties, as one by one my favorite dramatic and comedy programs disappeared (or made disappointing transition to TV--no one can convince me that Jack Benny, for instance, was better on TV than he was on radio).

Radio fed the imagination almost as much as reading did. With marvelously contrived sound effects, radio could evoke a panoply of scenes which remained beyond even Hollywood's visualization, and far beyond that of television. As a kid I tried to imitate radio's sound effects, and practiced the many voices of the various character-types. All of us kids did the sounds of cars shifting up through the gears, the squeal of brakes, and gunshots and explosions. I did these and other sound effects in my bed each night--to my mother's occasional annoyance.

I think what annoyed her was not the silly noises I made so much as the fact that I made them for hours on end. It used to take me two hours or more of this before I wore myself out and fell asleep. (I always protested that it was not my acting-out of the stories I told myself that kept me awake, but the fact that my mother put me to bed too soon--while I was still wide awake. To this day I still think that was true: my bedtime had advanced only to 9:00 p.m. by the time I was out of grade school.)

By the time I was setting my own bedtime, the interval during which I told myself stories had decreased considerably. And the stories had evolved greatly. When I was thirteen, I started fantasizing about the fanzines and prozines I'd some day put out. Each seemed, then, to lie beyond my actual grasp. (In school I filled my notebooks with logo designs for imagined prozines the way I'd once filled them with futuristic cars and rockets.) It's mildly fantastic to look back on my life and realize that I've actually realized some of those fantasies.

During the dark years of my adolescence, my fantasies were also darker--self-pitying fantasies of being maimed and causing those who'd scorned me to realize too late what horrible things they'd done to me. I look back on them now with no pleasure at all, but at the time they filled me with a deeply perverse satisfaction.

Since I read science fiction and fantasy, my "stories" began to reflect this, but rarely in a realistic way. The purpose of these "stories" was not precisely to "entertain," but rather to

induce sleep. Nonetheless, some of what I read seeped into my "stories." George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* triggered a memorable, several-year-long series of fantasies about what I'd do in a world undevastated but newly devoid of people. (I liked the idea of moving into New York's Museum of Natural History . . . .) More often, I entertained "superhero" fantasies: what it would be like to have wings, or some other realistically impossible attribute. Sometimes I tried rationalizing the fantastic, sometimes I tried figuring out what the realistic consequences might be of an unrealistic attribute, and sometimes I pursued the ego-satisfaction of utterly unrealistic premises unrealistically pursued. (One of the latter was the notion of a being with such total mental/telepathic powers that he could go anywhere in the Universe, and survive any environment: total wish-fulfillment fantasy.)

By this time I was starting to write science fiction, but I rarely borrowed from my bedtime fantasies--I saw little or no connection. (One rare exception was the winged creatures in *Star Wolf*, which I based on the sleep-inducing fantasies I'd told myself some years earlier. But I can think of no others.)

By this time my fantasies had turned in other directions. While I was married, living with someone, or having a regular love-life, my "stories" tended to be escapist fantasies of the sort I've already described. But when I was between lovers, I might fantasize a relationship with someone I knew (and lusted after), or with a fictitious lover. At first these were pure wish-fulfillment, but I found those too "easy" and thus too unsatisfying. I wanted the patina of reality. So I tried to mock up realistic situations and realistic individuals. If it was someone I knew, I tried to imagine as accurately as possible how she would react and what she'd say and do in the situation in which I'd placed her. I tried to hear her real voice, her own choice of words. This often involved "redrafting" when I realized I'd gotten some essential detail wrong. And this, I think, was of value to me as a writer, in my fiction, although I didn't realize it at the time.

As I got older I tended to ring changes on all the varieties of "stories" I told myself. By now the "stories" might be thin fragments that occupied only a few minutes before I fell asleep: mood-inducers, supplied mostly out of habit. And, increasingly, nostalgia played a major role--nostalgia for actual events of my past, or nostalgia for old "stories," dusted off and reused more for the benefit of that nostalgia than for the "stories" themselves. Falling asleep was rarely difficult any more.

Then, last March, I was arrested. The even emotional equilibrium I'd achieved was shattered. On occasions I was severely depressed, and I worried about what would happen to me. I had little appetite, and suffered routine indigestion. The bottom fell out of my stomach every time certain thoughts occurred to me--which they regularly did. It was much harder getting to sleep. I found myself trying the old "stories"--but they didn't work. I did not sleep well.

That continued until my sentencing--until my fate became known to me. Then I had the reality of incarceration to deal with, rather than my speculative fears.

As I described in my first Letter, I had little to do for my first three days here except to doze. I was in a relatively featureless cell, isolated from others, with nothing whatsoever to do. (The inmates here call the "R" cells--I was, you'll recall, in R-44--"The Hole." One can be sent back to "The Hole" for infractions of the rules, like fighting, and I suppose we're put there first in order to show us just what it's like.) It's hard to sleep under those conditions: it's cold (and you don't get even a blanket), the mattress is a thin vinyl-covered pad on a concrete shelf, there is no pillow, and the bright light stays on all the time. I tucked one end of the mattress under itself to create a sort of pillow, and tried to sleep the time away. The noises made it even more difficult: new inmates flipped out on PCP, or kicking heroin cold-turkey, others cadging cigarettes from each other ("Gimme a cigarette, man. Aw come on, asshole!"), or cursing each other ("I gonna whip yo ass, mutha!"), or howling like wolves, often in bizarre choruses, like real wolves. One, in the cell next to mine, sang the same simple-minded chorus of a song, loudly, for more than an hour at a stretch, for two days.

I was reminded of the six months I'd shared Brad Balfour's apartment on East 95th Street in New York City, in 1979--sleeping in a tiny triangular room with only one window that opened onto an airshaft, forced to listen to someone's TV set. On that occasion, I fantasized about having my own apartment, planning out a fantasy apartment with a secret garden (I missed my Virginia home).

I tried some of my oldest escapist fantasies in that R-cell, and they worked, taking me in and out of waking-dreams and deeper sleep. There was no way to tell the passage of time except by the meals.

Getting up to the A-Blocks, but having to sleep on the floor, with minimal privacy and

minimal opportunity to sleep, I found myself fantasizing an old role--that of the Avenger, a character who Righted Wrongs from a position of invulnerability, protected by a force field and able to act at will. I didn't consider righting *my* wrongs--that was too close to reality, too depressing to contemplate. (I'd fantasized blowing up the Falls Church Police Department the night after my arrest, but it only made me angry, adrenalated, and more awake than ever.) Instead, I went into the situations of the books I'd been reading, and clobbered those Bad Guys who'd escaped the hero. The first was *The Lords of Discipline*: the self-righteous General who orchestrated the corruption of the Institute. That was fun: I put myself to sleep (twice a day, the second time after the 5:00 a.m. breakfast) for a week with that. Later, I used the corrupt politicians in Robert Douglas Mead's *Heartland*. It was very satisfying.

Now that I've achieved a cell of my own (my own little room off the dayroom, wherein I sleep, nap in evenings after dinner, and keep my books and extra underwear) it's easier to go to sleep. There's little light (except when the guard, on his nightly rounds, shines his flashlight through the window in my cell door and into my eyes), and a sense of being in my own snug little nest. (Actually, it's no worse than that room in Brad's apartment.) So the Avenger has slipped off stage. Now I think of lovers, past and future, of driving a car cross-country, and other forms of mental escape. I look ahead, to the freedom that lies only a few months before me.

And I sleep better.

-- Ted White

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Ted White's *Letters From Prison* are written to his friends in SF fandom; this one is published by Lucy Huntzinger. *Letters* 1 through 3 were published by Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden; 4 and 6 by Victor Gonzalez; 7, 8, and 10 by Mark Kernes; and 11, 12, 13 and 14 by John D. Berry.

Last heard, Ted was due to be released on December 4, 1986 at 5:30 a.m. Since this letter is unlikely to be published before that date (it's December 2, 1986 as this is typed), Ted's prison address will be totally useless. Ted's home address, which is more to the point, is 1014 North Tuckahoe Street, Falls Church, VA 22046.

There are more unpublished letters; if you can do a set, get in touch with Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, 75 Fairview, No. 2D, New York, NY 10040, or with Ted at his home address (see above). Credit for Fearless Typist: Stacy Scott done this.

PLEASE NOTE: Ted's *Letters From Prison* are not for review in any fanzine.

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